"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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A Rural Challenge to the Protestant Church

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Many rural sociologists have stated that the rural church is dying and some have gone so far as to state that this particular institution is already dead. These assertions are partially a matter of controversial opinion; however, we may say with certainty that this important rural organization is declining in its position.

A part of the decline of the rural church in the South may be attributed to the following factors:

a. The rapid increase in number of radios in rural homes.

b. The population shift to cities and a consequent loss of wealth and rural leadership.

c. Poorly trained rural ministers. The organized Protestant churches are training ministers to preach in cities only, as there is little professional acquaintance of ministers with the problems of our rural people. The very old minister and the very young minister are found most prevalent in agrarian areas. The former has taken a feeble last stand in a different environment after having been weakened and cast aside by encroaching age as a city minister; the latter has just completed training in a theological school and is testing his wings for flight to the urban altar.

d. Over-churching. There is one church to every 317 peoples in the South. This high ratio of churches makes for a heavy economic burden on the shoulders of a small congregation and a consequent poorly financed and weakened church program which is manned by a low-salaried minister.

e. Increase in farm tenancy. The rapid increase of farm tenancy coupled with low economic income and a mobile population reflects itself in the instability of rural social institutions.

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f. The growth of unstable emotional sects. Economic pressure and laissez-faire policy, in the rural South, of the Protestant church have given rise to the "Holy Roller" and kindred congregations.

g. Poor physical equipment and buildings.

h. Increased denominational competition.

i. Declining economic support of the rural church. This decline in economic support has been due to: farm tenancy, tariff, depression, mechanization of agriculture, inequality of freight rates, loss of agricultural export trade and the uncertainty of agricultural income.

j. Automobiles, highways and picture shows are inducing competitive rivalry with the rural church.

A multitude of the aspects of American civilization are changing rapidly. There has been an industrial revolution and we are now in the midst of an agricultural revolution, and, too, the majority of our population is no longer rural. The rural school has kept pace with some of these variations by adopting a program of consolidation. However, the rural Protestant church has clung severely to the traditions of an antiquated social and economic past--there has been no consolidation of social and economic resources for the support of a new rural church program.

There are five well-defined institutions that predominate in American civilization: the school, the family, the church, the government, and business enterprise. These institutions have weathered the processes of an aging civilization by rendering definite services to society. Whenever any institution fails to render some definite service it is cast aside and forgotten in the tedious process of social evolution.

The greatest single weakness of the rural church lies in the fact that this institution is failing to meet the needs of the rural people--it is failing to render a definite service.

In what manner may the Protestant church strengthen its program in the rural South? Perhaps this question can best be answered by presenting a brief outline of a revised church program. One must bear in mind that there is a scarcity in variety of institutions in rural areas for the social and economic betterment of all phases of rural civilization. The rural church and the rural school are most conspicuous. Urban civilization presents quite a contrast in both number and variety of similar purposed institutions, that is, Chamber of Commerce, Lions Club, Rotary Club, Community Chest, City Health Clinic, Art Museum, Library, Y.M.C.A., Boy Scouts, Kiwanis Club, etc. In order to maintain a balance between rural and urban civilization the rural church and the

rural school must assume the responsibility of rendering a part of those services made available by a myriad of institutions, to the urban half of our population.

A revised church program for strengthening the position of the Protestant church in the rural South must have a dual purpose:

First: The rural church must meet the spiritual and devotional needs of the people. But do not stop here--the church must do more than this as an increasing number of rural people are remaining at their homes and tuning their radios each Sunday to the outstanding sermons of the day.

Second: The church must meet the physical and social needs of the rural people. The essential teachings of the Christian religion are hinged on the following phrase, "the rendering of unselfish service to one's fellowman." Should not the church afford leadership in making these teachings practical, real, and constructive, that a rural people may see accomplishments with their own eyes? Is it not a practical rural church program that teaches a people how to combat the spread of typhoid fever--is this not a greater service not only to one's God, but to one's fellowman--is it not as important religiously to save human lives as it is to save human souls?

A rural church program must be concerned with the problems of: farm tenancy, rural diet, soil conservation, rural housing, agriculture and agricultural income, rural health, rural education, sanitation, rural recreation, and rural youth. A solution to these and numerous other rural problems is the need of the rural people. Physical accomplishments in the process of a solution to these rural problems under the leadership of the church will strengthen this institution and the peoples of a rural civilization. The Protestant religion will then become a part of the everyday lives of the peoples. These rural problems cannot be solved by sermons from city pulpits emulating the radio in the rural home of an unlike civilization.

In order to make this proposed program effective the Protestant church must prepare ministers to preach to rural congregations by equipping them with a knowledge of agriculture, rural community organization, rural leadership, and the many problems confronting a rural civilization.

A complete social and economic survey of the rural area served by a church must precede any program of reorganizing the individual church. The revelation of the spiritual, social, and economic needs of the people in a survey will furnish an ample foundation for a constructive and practical religious program in each rural area. The prevalence of malaria in one community may be its foremost problem, whereas the economic consequence of a one-crop system of agriculture may present the foremost problem of another community.

Why should the organized Protestant churches of America be concerned with a declining rural church in the South? A brief review of recent population trends in the United States will give ample basis for consternation.

Dr. O. E. Baker, Senior Agricultural Economist for the United States Department of Agriculture, has pointed out that those cities in the United States of more than 100,000 people cannot maintain a stationary population. The fact is that these cities have a 20 per cent deficit in ability to maintain a stationary population as represented in number of childbirths. The rural areas, in contrast, have a 50 per cent surplus of children in ability to maintain a stationary rural population. The rural areas replenish and contribute to the growth of cities.

The South is the "incubator" of our nation. Almost 60 per cent of all migrants to the city came from the South in a great trek of population from rural to urban areas during that period from 1920 to 1930. The Protestant church predominates in the city of today only because of the past domination of the Protestant church in rural areas.

The Catholic church is evidencing concern by intensifying its plans to render a program of service to the rural peoples and this church will thus strengthen its position in these areas. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference is dedicated to the achievement of economic, social, and spiritual security for rural America. The Manifesto on Rural Life, a book recently published by this organization, covers the problems of the rural family, tenancy, education, health, cooperatives, credit, taxation, and other phases of the numerous problems confronting the rural people of America. The Catholic church has recognized a most immediate and lasting means of strengthening its position in the rural and urban areas. This church is beginning to forward a practical church program in an area of declining Protestant churches and, in so doing, it is laying a solid foundation upon which to strengthen its urban church of tomorrow.

The survival of the Protestant church will depend upon an immediate revision of its church program to one of concern for the grave problems of the rural South, the "incubator" of our nation.